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ABSTRACT

To deal successfully with the French people in business, the American must first be conversant with his own culture. The French have a tradition of firm opinions and take an intellectual view of the world. Thinking is hierarchical, as is the French society. Education emphasizes strong command of the French language and all formal aspects of French culture, and acculturation of immigrant groups into this system is widespread. Criticism is used more than reward to promote progress. Educational and familial acculturation produce both an authoritarian and an individualistic people. Those who succeed are those who think, and each seeks a niche in the hierarchy. Business tends to imitate the highly-regarded and powerful government. The drive to succeed and the preference for individualism often combine to produce individuals who wish to both participate in and get around the authoritarian system. These traits do not always mesh well with American business culture. However, all the major aspects of French culture can and should be learned by American business people. This knowledge is indispensable to good relations with the French. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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How to Cope with the French:

Keys to Understanding French Culture

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HOW TO COPE WITH THE FRENCH:

KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING FRENCH CULTURE

In the 1920's Calvin Coolidge once said that the business of America was business. In the 1950's then Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson, former CEO of General Motors, testified that what was good for America was good for General Motors and vice versa. Now in the Gay Nineties of the 20th Century, American interests are not having such a gay time conducting their affairs for their own and the general prosperity of the nation. It is true that the trade deficit has come down from its shameful highs; also the U.S. government in concerted efforts with the other industrialized nations has attempted to manipulate the value of the dollar in order to effect our international trade balances more positively. Nevertheless, the days of easy hegemony in the marketplace which the U.S. enjoyed after World War II are definitely over.

In this new era of real competition from our world trading partners, a key factor for our own greater success has been minimized; it is the successful use of foreign languages and cultures by American-born business people. We continue to blunder forward under our great American myth of monolingual superiority. If they want to do business with us, they have to do it in English (Barnum and Wolniansky 55-57). They must understand American ways. We continue to act as if God is an American and that he only speaks English, of course. This brings me to our topic. Why can't those damn French speak English? Why don't they understand our culture? Don't they know the American way of life is the greatest? Who do they think they are, anyway? Well, they think and they know they are French.

It is a daunting and on-going challenge to cope with the French. France is the fifth

richest economy in our world; fifty-five million French are busily creating their own grand scheme of life, their own "joie de vivre". One hundred million other people in the world use the French language every day. It is true that everyone (or almost) who is someone in this world generally speaks English; however, it is just as likely that anyone who is someone also has French as his/her second language. The educated elites of this world are most often educated in both English and French. Both through its economy and through its language, France and the French create a powerful counterbalance to our so-called anglo-saxon supremacy.

To cope successfully with the French in our business dealings with them, we must come to some general understandings of where they are coming from. We need to begin to observe the strategies of being French. However, before I discuss this major topic, I must first return to the learner, the American business person.

While it is a truism that one learns more about one self and one's culture as one is learning about others and their culture, it is essential for the American business person to know his own culture well before he can adequately cope with the French and theirs. My brief remarks hear about the French are no real substitute for the lengthy, arduous process of learning the French language and culture. Who are we then as Americans? Are we generous, tolerant, populist, egalitarian, loving, easy-going, hard-working, individualistic, risk-taking, market-oriented, quality-directed, anti-regulatory, team-spirited? Are we? Are you? Are you firmly grounded in our national history? Are you firmly based in your ethical values? Are you well-informed about world events? Are you firmly fixed in the principles and history of the market economy? Have you read Karl Marx? Is the only French you

know, "laissez-faire"? Do you know your place in the American class structure? Do you affirm high-brow or low-brow culture? Have you read any books outside your field of expertise recently? Can you carry on a cogent, general conversation about life in these United States? Do you know who are you as an American? If you do not know who you are in terms of being American, then you are not a competent individual in the eyes of the French. I am not speaking here about discovering oneself through therapy. The private aspects of one's American soul must be quite hidden from the French; they are not interested, at least not initially. I am speaking here of holding one's own in general discussion about America and American ways. If we lace our conversations with, "I don't know, whatever, well, ok, sure, I guess, etc", we will be found ridiculous by the French. We must know ourselves well as a people, as a culture, as representatives in order to demonstrate our justifiable pride in ourselves.

Why must we have such a solid knowledge of ourselves and our culture? We need to do so because the French themselves already have a set of ideas, generalizations, stereotypes, opinions, clichés, prejudices, etc. about us. Americans are naive, child-like, over-generous, over-friendly, materialistic, optimistic, spendthrift, domineering, rude, superficial, hypocritical, anglo-saxon, etc. It is of no importance that these and other attitudes may be false or true or somewhere in between depending on the individual. The key factor to retain here is that there is an opinion; there is no void. The French, each and everyone, have an opinion (Nourissier 115). They have their "petite idée". The most and least intelligent of them expresses without false modesty any and all the opinions they can muster about anything at all. They easily come up with a generalization, a universal idea, a folk saying, a maxim, a

distinction, an exception, in whatever jargon they are adept at using. They do so in order to evaluate, to judge, to categorize, to hierarchize (Lannes 54). They know or, at least, they think they know; they may be right or not depending on their real capacities. Some will graciously change their minds with persuasion and new information; some will not - they cannot.

The French do not live officially with uncertainty. In reality they do of course; yet, their mythical affirmations of themselves as French, of their culture, of their civilization, of their civilizing mission, of their place in Europe, of their place in the world are not uncertain. Uncertainty has been, for a long time, officially displaced by cartesian logic (Nourissier 122). A French friend of mine admitted that an opinion could start off from a subjective mindset, but then it was followed through logically! He reminded me that Jean-Jacques Rousseau spreads his sentiments and feelings out on every page in the most universal, affirmatory logical manner. The cartesian stance which was developed during the Enlightenment and then enshrined by the Revolution and Napoleon has now come to embody the core of the French "weltanschauung". It is the core of their familial acculturation and their education system. Even the recent public breastbeatings about the loss of French national identity stem from this tradition. What we as Americans must live with the results of the French tradition.

What are the results of this world view? First of all, this view permits all the French to expound, to analyze, to criticize, to generalize on the universal idea of being French. Most importantly, this world view stems from, promotes, and returns constantly to an emphasis on the intellectual; it is based on thinking, the clever use of intelligence, on logic. It requires categorization. The French love to build hierarchies, they enjoy distinctions,

subtleties; they build boxes within boxes, they seek to codify, to lay down, to plan, to delineate, to structure, to deconstruct all knowledge, all behavior into neat compartments (Lannes 55). Concomitantly, the world view invites judgement, evaluation, reward, punishment; value must be attached to distinction in place, in the hierarchy, in the category, in the structure.

The French are acculturated into a bourgeois republic officially based on a meritorious hierarchy. The national system of education with its anonymous examinations, as set up by Napoleon, is, with minor modifications, still in place. It is of course true that cultural advantages, which a middle-class or upper-middle class economic status provides, ensure that the children of these classes succeed more so than the poorer classes. Nonetheless, competence is assured.

The key factor in this acculturation process which promotes the quality of being French is the cluster of attitudes which surrounds the idea of language, the French language. The French national character is more intimately bound up with concepts of language as an abstract external reality than that of the American national character.[1] Language in the French-speaking world is treated with a concern for perfectionism which is not paramount in the English-speaking world. Certainly it is not as important for us as Americans, given our immigrant history.

The French educational system lays great emphasis on learning well the French language and all formal aspects of French culture. France, also a nation of immigrants, assimilates and has assimilated its many origins by this strong, centralized educational system (Nourissier 117). The system acculturates all and produces the competent elites it needs to

continue the culture; in order to accomplish these goals, it must judge, it must evaluate. Any student in France is thus constantly and repeatedly graded, evaluated. The most intelligent are openly praised and the less intelligent are openly criticized. Since almost all individuals fail more often than they succeed, almost all the French develop a resistance to being judged, to being evaluated by others. Yet, at the same time, the student sees that prestige, power, influence accrue to those who are judges, who have a place from which to judge. Criticism and denigration are most often used to spur students, more than praise and easy reward. For an American, the practical results of this system manifest themselves when he is insulted by a taxi driver for not speaking good French. At least the French person knows his French and can thus judge the stupidity of this American person. One has to make points where one can.

As a result, the educational system and familial acculturation produce in the same person a double manifestation. They produce both an authoritarian and an individualist--a conformist and a rebel. The "raison d'être" of the system is to produce those competent elites necessary to run the country. The universities, the institutes, the "grandes écoles" ensure the formation of these elites most efficiently. The two most prestigious of the latter are the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, the ENA, and the Polytechnique. The business schools are not as prestigious. It is still far more coveted to work for the French State or a state-run industry than to be an independent businessman. The French are French first and maybe capitalists second. The students who succeed in this difficult system are first and foremost taught to think. This is the cartesian tradition. "I think, therefore, I am." The intellectual foundation for decisions, for evaluations, is thus created. It creates the rewards from the society for the intellectualization of knowledge. And success in this system leads to

power, real power in French society.[2] The reward of power integrates the student into the authoritarian system because he/she has learned to use the system and thus has been rewarded by the hierarchy by a place within it.[3] The process of learning critically creates a cynical obedience to power in order to receive power. Compromise, collegiality, cooperation are not primarily rewarded. These techniques are learned secondarily as the necessary results of clashes with and among the powerful and the power-seeking. The logic of the reality of power produces a sufficient attitude of solidarity for French society to compete successfully worldwide. It is openly understood by all as a necessary, and cynical process--the struggle between authority and solidarity (Lannes 55).

By examination, by "piston" (influence), by ambition and hard work, each French person seeks his/her niche in the hierarchy.[4] The most coveted job are those with the State bureaucracy where job security is legendary, where one can become safe to lead a comfortable life. All France lives by the administration of the bureaucracy; all live by laws, directives, decrees,[5] rules, guidelines, etc. They all delineate and render more certain day to day living. Any bureaucrat, great or small, grasps his/her parcel of power within the niche and is protected from below and from above by the rules.[6] Power is the place in the hierarchy, initiative, efficiencies, reforms, are not primarily or necessarily rewarded. The politics of responsibilities, of personalities, of private benefits, of privileges are far more important. On a higher plane, it takes much posturing of universal logic and smoothing of special interests to push the State, the Unions or the Business Leaders to change whatever.[7]

Therefore, to be French and to be affirmed in French culture is to be part of the power of the French State. These rewards are far more coveted than the lure, the thrill of

riches in the market-place. French business thus tends to imitate the French State; it is protectionist, secretive, authoritarian, combative, rule-oriented, and politically ideological. The authoritarian system produces devotees of authority who use their own authority to affirm themselves as officially French.

What about the vaunted French sense of individualism? The key to understanding the French love for individualism, for non-cooperation, for non-conformity, stems equally from learning to think for oneself. The French person understands cynically the logic and necessity of the authoritarian system. However, by the promotion of intelligence and cleverness, the system produces individuals who at the same time wish to get around it. A very drole, potentially anarchic corollary to authority comes into practice. It is the open understanding that rules, laws, directives, etc., are perfectly necessary to run the system; however, they are not meant for me. They all exist for the system and for the stupid who do not know how to circumvent the system. This strategy is the "Système D". "Débrouillardise" (Lannes 55) is the French term for circumventing the official structures for one's own advantage. It is the shrewd, scheming process of garnering extra privileges. We have friends in high places; we can cheat on our taxes; we can keep our money in Switzerland. Here we see the Frenchman jump to the head of the line. Here we see the frantic competition on the highway. Each person is convinced he will beat the traffic. The clever way, the shrewd way, the rebellious way all become for each user of this system the winning way. Do you wait for a red light at 4 a.m.? Any French person understands why one should not. The D system turns the entire system into a vast game, a subtle game. Intelligence, intellectuality, quick-mindness, panache, cynicism are the most valued. The D

system provides a real safety valve--a psychological mechanism--which mitigates against the stifling aspects of official authoritarian policies. It explains both the Collaboration and the Resistance during World War II. The hierarchical system is counterbalanced and French society is rendered more enjoyable, liveable, humane, fun. This is the dialectic through which authority and individualism coexist so dynamically.

There is wealth of understandings which can be explained from this fundamental duality. I will enumerate but a few here as insights into how to cope with these crazy, often exasperating French.

First of all, any American corporation that wishes to emphasize its wonderful team spirit, its wonderful corporate family togetherness, its wonderful conformist friendliness must be aware that the French will not enthusiastically and automatically fall into line. They prefer clear lines of authority and responsibility. They prefer not to gather and to fold into one great "mélange" all levels of managership and family. They prefer smaller levels of social conformity. They remain with their families, their few school friends, their intimate circle (Lannes 57). They prefer to be polite and not to be "chummy". In the work place they can produce quite efficiently while tolerating a much higher level of personal discord among the personnel than in the United States. Dispute, argument, disagreement, disdain are more accepted because, albeit grudgingly, it is everyone's social right to have his/her own opinion/decision/option. When a French person loses; he acquiesces. The French are not conditioned to believe that discord is necessarily detrimental to productivity or mental health. The French are the longest lived large population.

It is not altogether an impossible task to begin getting along with and coping with the

French. All the major aspects of their culture which they prize most highly are attitudes and patterns of behavior which can be learned, acquired (Bernstein 144-145). We can accord to them graciously their superiority in wine, cheese, cuisine, fashion, bicycles, the art of living, the pursuit of leisure time. The greatest result of their system is a passion for excellence (Nourissier 118). Excellence and quality are a consistently pursued in those areas of their greatest pride. All American businesses can learn from this fine intellectual tradition; if one can conceive of the finest, one can and has a higher obligation to produce the finest. Of course, the finest often has a steep cost; but for the French it is always worth it.

The American business person must know who he/she is; he/she must be most knowledgeable about our own culture. If our business people cannot be expertly prepared to discuss great universal ideas with the French about being French, about being France; then at least, our people should develop a sense of attentive modesty while learning on the job with the French. We, Americans, must learn to avoid illogical, haphazard, indifferent, ill-informed types of remarks and behaviors. Otherwise we will see the average French acquaintance, friend, or business colleague turn into the stern teacher. You must never drink coca-cola with filet mignon! Conversation is a great art among the French; religion is never discussed; it is a private matter of conscience. We ought to remember our own racial problems before we offer solutions to their racist/anti-semitic problems.[8] We also need to tread tenderly on the subject of French foreign policy. The Abbé Chauvin, a fanatically patriotic priest devoted to Napoleon, has given us the term - "chauvinism."

To conclude, let me return to the most important factor. American businesses must realize the importance of the use of the French language and the awareness of French culture.

Our native-born American representatives must have this background in order to conduct business (Fixman 25-46). This knowledge is indispensable to good relations with the French. The core of the French identity is more intimately bound up with language than our American identity is bound up with English. We must be of good cheer; all aspects of French culture and language can be acquired, can be learned. To be French is to prize intelligence and so intelligent foreigners can be prized for their knowledge, awareness, expertise in things French.

This process of learning is not easy; nor is it quickly praised. You will not get the fat contract after a few hesitating "Bonjours"! However, any individual who takes the time to learn is welcomed, particularly Americans whom the French really like and admire very much (Bernstein 144-145). Now they will not love anyone quickly and hypocritically in the great American style. But that is why they are French and we are Americans. And lastly and most importantly, we must cope with the French because it is in our most vital political and economic interests. There is a great deal of money to be made.

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NOTES

1. Richard Bernstein in Fragile Glory: A portrait of France and the French. has a pertinent longer discussion of the French defense of the purity of their language (138-144).

2. ---. In Fragile Glory: A Portrait of France and the French Bernstein has an extended discussion of power acquisition by the French (262-278).

3. There is a lengthy discussion of the acquisition of power in French society in The French by Theodore Zeldin (161-184).

4. Alain Peyrefitte in Le Mal français presents a scathing critique of the "disease" of bureaucracy in France.

5. In On ne change pas la société par decret Michel Crozier has a penetrating analysis of the French weakness for decrees.

6. A withering exposé of the power and privileges of special interest groups in France can be found in Toujours Plus: Liberté-Inégalités-Féodalités, by François De Closets.

7. There is an extended discussion on bosses and workers in France in The French by Theodore Zeldin (21-230).

8. Richard Bernstein has an extended treatment of anti-semitism and racism in France in Fragile Glory: A Portrait of France and the French (148-165).